

The surf breaks gently at a beach west of Dili.



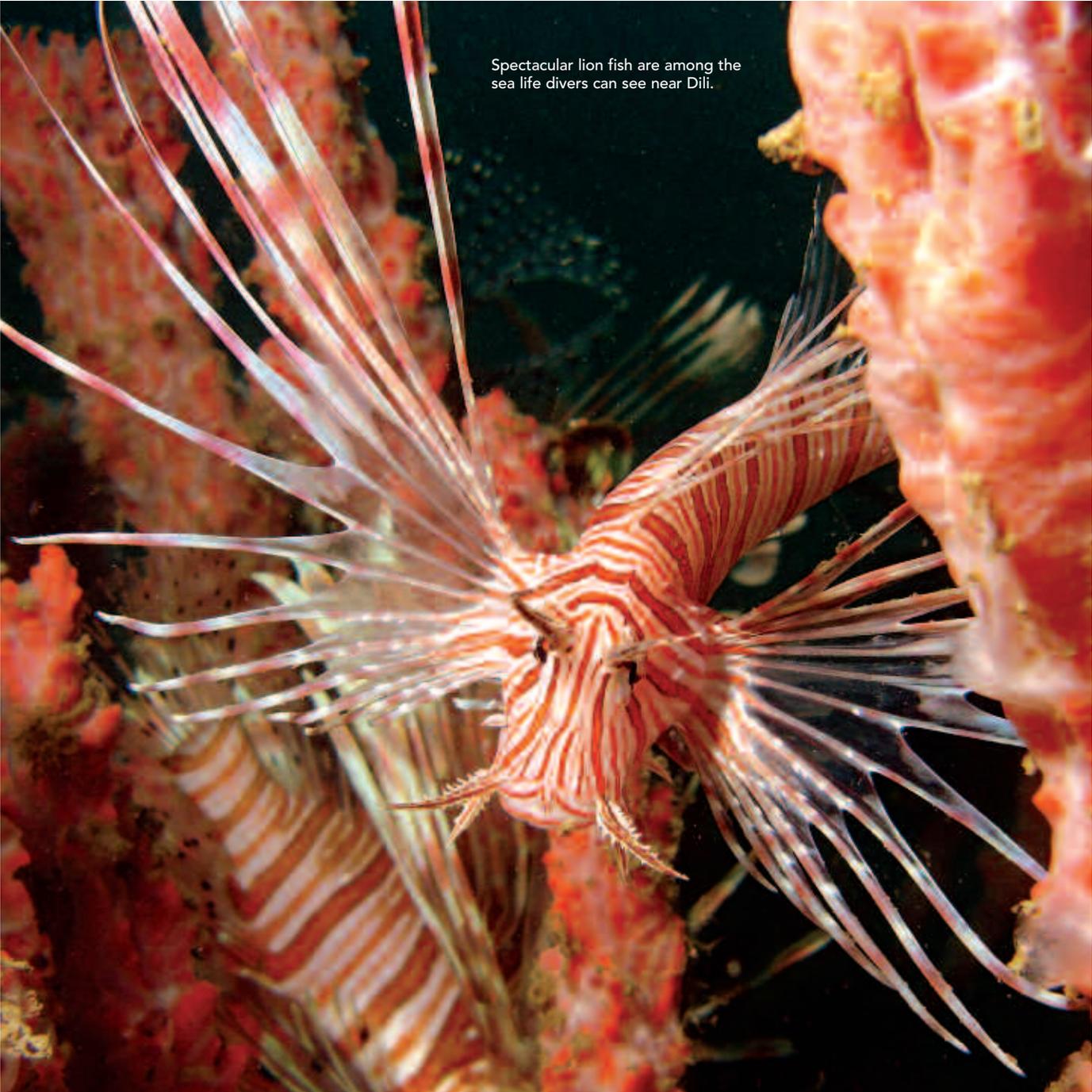
PHOTOGRAPH: U.S. EMBASSY IN DILI



# East Timor

U.S. Helps a New Nation  
Find Its Footing

By Seiji Shiratori and Aaron Forsberg



Spectacular lion fish are among the sea life divers can see near Dili.

U.S. officials posted to Dili grapple with the same challenge East Timor itself faces: How to guide one of the world's newest nations along the path to success.

Mission officials say that each person posted to Dili deals with front-burner issues every day and has the opportunity to make a real difference.

The 10 direct-hire Americans at this small post represent State, the U.S. Agency for International Development and the Department of Defense. The mission also employs more than 120 Locally Employed staff, including local guards.

#### BEAUTY AND CONFLICT

According to legend, the island of Timor first came into being as a crocodile. It differs from the volcanic islands to the west in Indonesia. Composed mainly of limestone, Timor is on part of the continental shelf that has been pushed up as the Australian tectonic plate slides over the Eurasian plate to the north. Below the sea are rich deposits of oil and gas.

Timor is in the dry tropics. Outdoor sports enthusiasts find the rugged environment inviting. Despite severe deforestation, the island's varied landforms and vegetation offer spectacular natural beauty. Untouched coral reefs teeming with marine life make for prime scuba diving.

The first inhabitants were Austronesian peoples. Subsequent Asian migrants introduced agriculture. The first Europeans were the Portuguese, who established a colony in the 16th century comprising the eastern half of the island plus the enclave of Oecussi. The Dutch occupied West Timor, which later became part of Indonesia. Chinese merchants conducted most trade.

The Portuguese ruled East Timor until 1975, and Portuguese is one of two official languages, along with the indigenous and widely spoken Tetum. Bahasa Indonesia and English are working languages.

On Nov. 28, 1975, East Timor declared independence from Portugal. Nine days later the Indonesian army invaded. The Timorese fought unsuccessfully against annexation. This struggle cost the lives of more than 10 percent of the population and reaffirmed the Timorese identity apart from Indonesia.

The people of East Timor voted for independence in a United Nations-

## AT A GLANCE: EAST TIMOR



**Capital**  
Dili

**Total area**  
15,007 square kilometers

**Approximate size**  
Slightly larger than Connecticut

**Government**  
Republic

**Independence**  
November 28, 1975 (from Portugal)  
May 20, 2002 (from Indonesia)

**Population**  
1.1 million

**Languages**  
Tetum, Portuguese, Indonesian, English and indigenous languages

**Religions**  
Roman Catholic, Muslim and Protestant

**Currency**  
U.S. dollar (USD)

**Per capita income**  
\$800

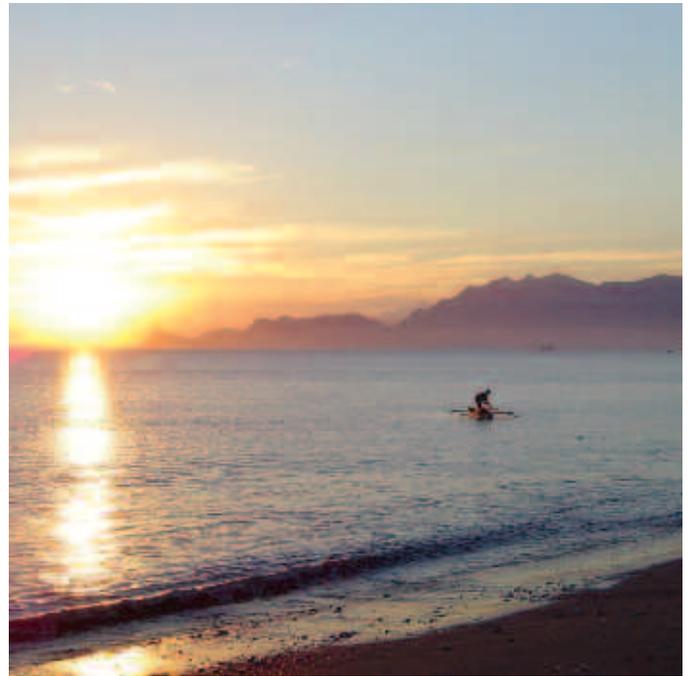
**Population below poverty line**  
42 percent

**Imports**  
Food, gasoline and kerosene

**Exports**  
Coffee, sandalwood and marble

**Internet country code**  
.tl

SOURCE: CIA World Factbook 2007



Upper left: USAID Director Flynn Fuller helps unload a Food for Progress donation destined for internally displaced persons. Upper right: The sun rises over Cristo Rei. Lower left: Water buffalo can be seen from the road between Dili and Baucau. Lower right: Darragh Paradiso and Elizabeth Wharton, wearing floppy hats, pose with their guides during a climb of Mt. Matebien, which is spiritually important to the Timorese.

supervised poll in August 1999. The ensuing wave of violence captured the world's attention. Indonesian troops and the Timorese militias they backed killed hundreds and laid waste to the country's infrastructure before international peacekeepers arrived in September.

#### LAUNCHING A NATION

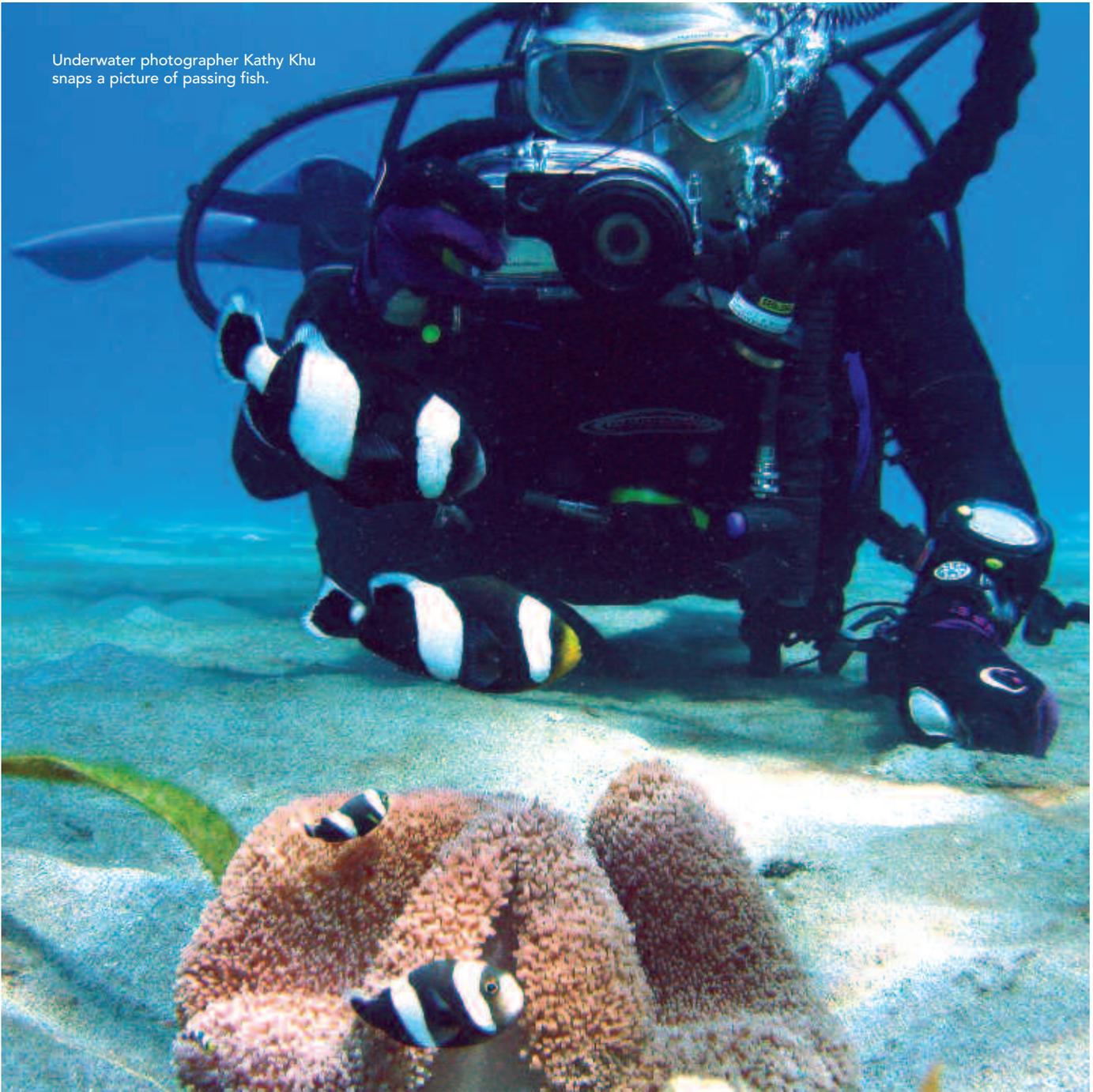
The United States established a liaison office in the capital of Dili in 2000 and has assisted the Timorese in building their new nation.

"The United States hopes East Timor can strengthen its nascent and democratic institutions and wisely use its rapidly growing petroleum revenues to become an example of stability in the region," says Chief of Mission Gary Gray.

Most Timorese live on the land and practice subsistence agriculture. With USAID assistance, the country has begun selling niche agricultural products, most notably organic coffee, to international buyers such as Starbucks.

Still, East Timor is one of the poorest nations in the world and

Underwater photographer Kathy Khu snaps a picture of passing fish.



has a high rate of unemployment. Oil and gas revenues now flow into a petroleum fund the government established to preserve the wealth for future generations. The country's future depends heavily on how its leaders invest these funds, because its petroleum resources will eventually run out.

Since independence, Timorese leaders have faced immense challenges in making the government apparatus work, defining a national identity and accommodating the many conflicting demands of the Timorese people. In the words of Prime Minister José Ramos-Horta, "Building a state, from almost zero, is a Herculean task."

Finding places in independent East Timor for veterans of the

resistance, the Catholic Church and other institutions has been particularly contentious.

"In dealing with all of these challenges," says Gray, "there isn't any real alternative to success. If East Timor does not succeed, the country could fall into long-term internecine strife and violence."

Embassy employees saw firsthand what the future could look like when internal divisions in the army sparked a national crisis in 2006. Early in the year, soldiers from the western districts of the country alleged discrimination by military leaders, who came mostly from eastern districts. These soldiers abandoned their posts and, in March, the commander of the armed forces dismissed about one-third of the army for absence from duty.



The U.S. embassy sits on a beachfront lot.

Protests against this decision inflamed previously mild divisions between easterners and westerners.

Clashes in Dili among demonstrators, the army and police in April and May claimed the lives of about 30 people and led to the collapse of public order. More than 150,000 Timorese fled their homes, mostly to camps for internally displaced persons. International security forces led by Australia intervened to restore order at the request of the government in May, and the U.N. Security Council established a new mission in East Timor in August.

The challenge now is to get East Timor back on track. The immediate focus is on the presidential and parliamentary elections scheduled for this year.

“We hope that East Timor has free and fair elections and that all parties accept the results,” says Gray. “We hope the military and the police will emerge from this crisis and develop into professional institutions under civilian control that fully respect human rights.”

Longer term, the U.S. government has been working to promote democratic governance, private sector-led growth and investment in the health and education of the people.

#### LIFE AT POST

Dili’s population is about 200,000, but the city feels smaller. American citizens number about 100. Many more Australians,



Upper left: Candlenut is processed at a USAID-funded facility near Baucau. Upper right: A garden on the side of Mt. Matebien features limestone formations. Lower left: USAID Director Flynn Fuller and AID administrative assistant Celestina da Fonseca survey the ruins of da Fonseca's family home, which was destroyed in the May 2006 violence. Lower right: The Portuguese left a reminder of their religious faith in this statue, which overlooks Dili.

Portuguese and other expatriates work for U.N. agencies, non-governmental organizations and the international security forces. Several well-stocked grocery stores and international restaurants cater to the expatriate community.

Many employees live within walking distance of the embassy, and the commute for all is short. The embassy compound is widely known as the nicest facility in town. Its spacious beach-front lot contains the chief of mission's residence, a small chancery, a gym, a playground, a tennis court and a new swimming pool.

The embassy has a small health clinic and a locally hired physi-

cian. Two international schools provide education through eighth grade. On weekends, children can enjoy the pool or the beach while parents take a break snorkeling, cooking outdoors or just relaxing at one of Dili's many restaurants.

"Despite its being among the Department's highest differential posts," says Management Officer Steve Hunt, "we've really worked hard to make Embassy Dili into a place that can support Foreign Service families." ■

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